

EOD Teams Cleaning Up Streets of Iraq

by Pfc. Joshua Hutcheson

AN NAJAF, Iraq (Army News Service, April 14, 2003) -- As the fighting begins to subside across Iraq, Explosive Ordnance Disposal teams are beginning the work of ridding the country of devices such as grenades, rockets, missiles and mortars that remain buried in fields, streets and front yards. "My guys take risks in order to minimize the risks to others," said Capt. Bryan Sopko, commander of the 725th EOD Company, from Fort Drum, N.Y. His unit is currently assigned to provide direct mission support to the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) in Iraq, as the division secures towns throughout the country.

After a two-day drive earlier this month from Kuwait to Camp Eagle III, several miles from An Najaf, soldiers of the 725th EOD Company had just enough time to unload some gear and take a quick stretch before they were told to proceed into the city. They were asked to take care of a dangerous situation at an agricultural school where 1st Brigade, 101st, had set up its tactical operations center. A weapons cache found in the school, along with others found throughout the city, were to be taken to a pit and disposed of. But the procedure wasn't simple: many of the explosive devices were spread over a large area. Some unexploded ordnance, or UXO, was in the form of debris, and some, including a mortar round, was intact and located within yards of where soldiers worked and lived. EOD came in to finish what 1st Brigade started. Its job was to locate all of the unexploded ordnance, collect it, figure out what was armed and what wasn't, and dispose of the ordnance in the safest manner possible.

Sopko decided to bring four EOD teams to An Najaf. Three of Sopko's teams drove HUMVEEs, and were referred to as light teams. The light teams have two soldiers, one of which is usually a staff sergeant, and a vehicle to carry the multitude of equipment they need. The larger team, called a heavy team, works out of a Light Medium Tactical Vehicle and has three members. This team is usually led by a sergeant first class; Sopko said they are the "heavy-hitters." The teams arrived at the school and found out from 1st Brigade that there was a more explosive situation in Najaf than they had expected. Besides the UXO at 1st Brigade, there was also an Iraqi truck in the city that was full of rockets painted with potential chemical symbols. EOD leaders decided to send two teams to check out the UXO site, and two teams to assess the situation with the Iraqi truck. The teams at 1st Brigade, consisting of Staff Sgt. Aaron Burns, team leader, Pfc. Robert Wiltshire, Spc. Jeffery Dills, and Spc. Jennifer Thomsen, got to work going over a pile of ordnance that was collected and not yet disposed of. They checked to see what had been fired and what hadn't. If the teams came across something that was armed, they disarmed it. Halfway through the reorganizing, Sgt. 1st Class Anthony Mami, team leader for the heavy team, drove up to the workers and warned them about touching certain mortars. "I've just been told that the building (the mortars) came from came up hot for chem.," he said. The mortars were discovered in a building that tested positive for containing mustard gas. These mortars had been brought out and lumped together with other mortars from around town. This information didn't make it to EOD until the last minute, but the soldiers had not yet reached that section of the UXO and had not been exposed.

Meanwhile, across town, two teams, Staff Sgt. Michael Taylor and Sgt. Mason Holquist, along with Staff Sgt. David Sander and Spc. Thomas Craft, were examining the truck full of missiles and rockets. They used a digital camera to better identify what they were dealing with. They returned with the pictures to show Sopko. The teams retired that night, forming plans about what to do in the morning. They slept on the vehicles, on the hoods, on the roofs, anywhere there was room. They said this was a regular routine; in fact, Wiltshire said their trucks are their life. Each truck is a self-contained EOD lab with equipment to disarm explosive devices, or to blow them up. Inside there's C-4 plastic explosive, and linear shape charges that can be made into different shapes for ease in demolition, Wiltshire said. Demolishing ordnance is easier than disarming because it requires less work and it's safer for the tech, Burns said.

EOD techs spend 10 months in job training at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla. The school teaches all branches of the military. Students learn how to disarm everything from chemical and biological explosives to homemade pipe bombs. The training is rigorous and difficult, said Sopko, with a 60 percent dropout rate. After graduating, techs are assigned to EOD companies. At one point there were only 800 EOD techs in the Army, so the military enacted stop-loss a year ago to keep units up to strength. Techs start out getting equipment and doing setup work for the senior member of the team, Wiltshire said. Wiltshire is also called "Rook" because he's the newest member of the company. After the junior members have enough experience and know the ropes, the team leader might send them out to do the dangerous work, Thomsen said. EOD is one of the few jobs where the seniors take the risks and the junior enlisted don't, Sopko said. This allows the trainees to learn from the team leader's experience.

The next morning, the EOD teams were faced with a new situation. During a bombing run by coalition forces a week earlier, a bomb had been dropped on an Iraqi truck carrying rockets filled with KB-1 submunition -- little golf ball-sized bombs. The truck had been hit in the middle of a street in Najaf. An engineering team came through the area and roped off part of the road for the safety of civilians. The locals were still driving on the road, though, and lifting the ropes and razor wire to get through. Adults, children and animals walked in the blackened blast area without caution in their steps. The four EOD teams pulled up to the area and parked hundreds of yards away. Two teams stayed by the vehicles for protection and crowd control, and three techs walked out into the danger area to see the extent of the damage. A number of Iraqis tried to help the techs by pointing out where some hidden UXO was, off the street in fields and in people's houses. The techs nodded and did what they could to let the people know that they were there to clean everything up.

Once the soldiers came back from checking out the area, the teams decided to remote detonate the UXO with C-4 plastic explosives. Psychological Operations units drove up and down the street playing a warning in Arabic from large speakers mounted on top of the vehicles for all the civilians to stay away for their own safety. The techs then set up for a remote demolition, in which they would be able to safely stay behind their vehicles. Once the fire extinguishers were out of the vehicles and ready, the techs began. "It's all very deliberate, that's the best word to use," Sopko said. "We're the most safety-

conscious soldiers in the Army," Mami said. The techs spent the afternoon setting off multiple explosions. The sounds of the blasts reached for blocks, pleasing children and scaring civilians in vehicles.

Since April 10, the 725th has destroyed 8,739 projectiles, 14 U.S.-made submunitions, 187 U.S.S.R.-made submunitions, 54 rockets, 2,605 fuses and 16,800 small arms. "It's interesting (in Iraq) because you see things here with explosives and ordnance that you wouldn't see anywhere else," Burns said. "I'm just having fun seeing new stuff," Wiltshire said.

(Editor's note: Pfc. Joshua Hutchison is a member of the 101st Airborne Division public affairs section.)